Election Possible Late This Year

Two Happy Events for Victoria?

Year of Turmoil Seen in B.C. Politics

By ALEC MERRIMAN

British Columbia's Social Credit government survived a year of turmoil in 1958 with a narrow victory—but nevertheless a victory—in the Dec. 15 Rossland-Trail byelection.

But indications point to an even greater year of turmoil in 1959 with the opposition parties, believing they have the Socreds on the run, pressing their attacks relentlessly and the Socred government, flushed with victory in the recent byelection, pushing on with its vast and sometimes fantastic development programs.

The next legislative session, which opens Jan. 22, will undoubtedly be one of the most exciting ever held in B.C.

Opposition Waits

Opposition members are eagerly awaiting a chance to cry out about former lands and forests minister Robert Sommers, now convicted of bribery-conspiracy charges in the handling of forest management licences. They will be out for the skin of Attorney-General Robert Bonner and Premier Bennett, who they claim unnecessarily delayed the Sommers case for two years.

They will demand answers to the power question — the Columbia, the Fraser and the Peace River where the government appears determined to let foreign Wenner-Gren capital develop a vast industrial empire over one-tenth of the province.

Election Due?

Out of it all a general provincial election may come, possibly in late August or middle September. Premier Bennett has said categorically there will be no general election until 1960 or 1961, but he has never been one to tip his hand politically, and a snap election in 1959 is thought by many observers to be a certainty.

It would appear unthinkable that the Wenner-Gren interests would be prepared to spend billions of dollars in northland development without fresh assurances of a friendly government remaining in power for some years. And to some observers the Rossland-Trail byelection indicated the Socreds are treading on shaky ground.

But out of all the turmoil Victoria will see at least two major and happy government events take place in 1959.

Mansion Ready

Government House will be occupied by Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Frank Ross in April and it is almost certain it will be officially opened by Queen Elizabeth in July.

The $1,500,000 Government House is now nearing completion and workmen are rushing for the March 31 completion deadline. The landscaped gardens are expected to be a riot of color for the Queen's visit to Victoria.

Courthouse, Too

The second major event for Victoria will be a start on construction of the long-awaited $1,500,000 to $2,000,000 Victoria courthouse on Cathedral Hill.

An October starting date is predicted with work being carried out as a winter work project. Completion is not expected until 1960.

City Hall Space

The courthouse site will provide ample parking facilities, a park, and provision for a new Victoria city hall to be fitted into the landscaping along plans submitted some time ago by the Capital Region Planning Board.

There will remain a view of stately Christ Church Cathedral from the lower town area around the Empress Hotel.

It is understood the operations of the motor vehicles branch, the land registry and registrar of companies will move to the new courthouse along with all courtroom facilities.

Museum Helped

The old courthouse will probably be used as an overflow for the existing provincial museum until a new museum on the existing government employees' parking lot can be built.

The government is expected to introduce major new labor legislation at the next session and indications are that it intends to get much tougher with labor than it has in the past.

This legislation will require a courageous government and upon it the government may rise or fall. Certainly it will be a topic of major and bitter debate in the House.

Department Switch

It is thought likely that early in the new year the mental health department may be removed from the authority of the provincial secretary and placed under the authority of the health and welfare department.

Power will undoubtedly be the focal point for barrage during 1959.

The Shrum royal commission into B.C. Power Commission financing will continue hearings here Jan. 5, and former B.C. Power Commission general manager H. Lee Briggs is expected to be on the stand.

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR FRANK M. ROSS
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Charges Explode

It was his startling charges, first made Nov. 12 at the same hour Premier Bennett was announcing formation of a vast development company to explore the Peace River, that touched off the political controversy of the year.

Mr. Briggs started off his campaign against the Social Credit government with charges that Premier Bennett was using refinancing policies in the BCPC to fulfil his political promises to clear up the net debt.

Involved Setup

The controversy over Mr. Briggs' charges became very involved with the premier denying them and Mr. Briggs continuing to make them and branching out into a major attack on the government's policies as a whole, especially the Wenner-Gren plan to develop 4,000,000 horsepower of hydro power on the Peace River system, and B.C. Electric operations.

The Shrum commission has been assigned to look into BCPC financing specifically, but has broad enough powers to investigate anything it feels necessary.

How far it will go is a matter of conjecture, but it is certain the Wenner-Gren plan will be a major topic at the spring session with tempers flaring over the matter at frequent intervals. It is undoubtedly the hottest subject in B.C. today.

Reports Due

he Columbia River development will spark another major controversy and the International Joint Commission is scheduled to bring down a major Columbia River report in Washington, D.C., in March. B.C.'s own Crippen Wright report on Columbia development is expected in a matter of days.

The Fraser River will create another major power controversy, following the release last month by the Fraser River Board outlining a proposal to develop the river for flood control and power at a cost of $525,000,000. The development, which would include 11 different dams which would control flooding of the lower Fraser, do little harm to fish and produce 1,500,000 horsepower of hydro power.

Decision Soon

What the provincial and federal governments will do about the proposals will be known by Jan. 31. It is thought likely that after further study a flood control authority may be established to work along with the B.C. Power Commission towards development of the Fraser.

All major highway construction on Vancouver Island was cleared up in 1958 with the completion of the Malahat section of the Trans-Canada Highway.

No Projects

There are no major highway projects to be undertaken on the Island in 1959, but the provincial government is expected to complete its seven-mile centre section of the Port Alberni-Tofino road by next summer. Next big Island road construction is expected to be in the north of the Island, but has not been scheduled for 1959.

The provincial government is expected to continue its accelerated highway building program on the mainland in 1959. In 1958 about $69,000,000 was spent on highway construction and it is expected an even greater amount may be spent this year as the government presses its plan to have the Trans-Canada Highway completed by 1960.

Work Continues

Work will continue on the Southern Trans-Provincial Highway and now under construction by the highways department are 40 to 50 major projects.

It is expected Queen Elizabeth will open the Deas Island Tunnel next July, but completion of the Second Narrows bridge is not expected until 1960.

If an election is called for this year, it is expected the provincial government will unveil a master $1,000,000,000 highways program to be carried out in the 10 years of the 1960s—the glorious 60s which has already become an election campaign catchword of the Socreds.

The greatest oil and natural gas search and explorations in the history of the province will be in progress in 1959 as more than a score of major oil companies look to B.C.'s northland for major new sources.

In the agricultural industry it is anticipated a major bid to colonize the Peace River country along a belt served by the PGE Railway will be made by the provincial argiculture department.

Forestry adviser Gordon Sloan will bring down several reports which may result in a revision of the forestry program in British Columbia.

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